

George Washington's Secret Service

Hitherto Unpublished Letter Shows First American Was Keen for Military Information and Knew How to Get It

IN these war times when our army and our navy have highly developed Intelligence Bureaus the advice of George Washington in regard to what was probably the first intelligence service the American military and naval forces ever had is interesting reading. It is contained in a letter written by the then commander in chief of the Continental Army on March 21, 1779, at a time when the cause was not going any too well. There is nothing to indicate to whom the letter was addressed, as the superscription is simply "Sir," and Martin Hofer of 103 East Seventy-fifth street, who owns the letter, does not possess any envelope. But evidently the communication was sent to the director of what was then the Intelligence Bureau, although of course that name was not used in those days.

With the letter went fifty guineas for a certain S—C—r, a member of the secret service. Also went the advice of Washington as to how the secret service agent should proceed to get information of the movements and plans of the British troops that would be of value to the Continental forces. Of peculiar interest at this time, when there is a demand for a forty foot channel through Hell Gate for use of our navy, is the postscript query of Washington reading:

"I wish merely for curiosity and that I may be prepared with sufficient knowledge for any future favourable contingency to know the depth of Hell Gate, the largest ship of war that has ever passed it and the largest that can pass it."

Importance Early Realized.

This shows that at the very beginning of our fight for national existence the importance of the Hell Gate channel from a military and naval point of view was recognized by Washington, who was a master of strategy. That this importance was overlooked by the military and naval authorities in later years is proved by the fact that nothing was done to improve the Hell Gate channel. And it has only been since the outbreak of the European war that there has been agitation for the deepening of the channel to a point where our naval vessels could use it freely.

History does not show whether George Washington as the first President of the United States attempted in any way to improve conditions in Hell Gate, but now after more than a century and a quarter President Wilson has personally interested himself in the improvement of the channel. It was because of the work done by Murray Hulbert, Commissioner of Docks and Ferries, to secure the immediate deepening of the channel to forty feet that Mr. Hofer the other day took to his office the original Washington letter and pointed out to him the direct evidence of Washington's realization of the importance of that entrance to New York Harbor.

Why He Wanted to Know.

That we are now cooperating as an ally of France as well as of Great Britain against a common enemy makes it of interest to recall what probably was in Washington's mind in March, 1779, when he wanted to know what was the largest ship that could go through Hell Gate. Then France was our ally in our war against Great Britain. In May, 1778, treaties of alliance with France had been ratified as the result of the work of Benjamin Franklin and two other American Commissioners.

"But the alliance brought troubles as well as blessings in its train," wrote Senator Henry Cabot Lodge in his "Life of Washington." "It induced a relaxation in popular energy and carried with it new and difficult problems for the commander in chief."

In July the French sent a fleet under D'Estaing. Washington saw the possibility of intercepting a British fleet, but the French commander found he was too late at the Delaware.

"Then he turned to New York and was too late there," writes Senator Lodge, "and found further that he could not get his ships over the bar."

The fleet then went to Newport, where

Middlebrook Mar 21 79

Sir.

With this letter you will receive Fifty Guineas for S—C—r which you will cause to be delivered as soon as possible, with a earnest exhortation to use them with all possible economy, as I find it very difficult to obtain hard money—

I wish C— could

on such a footing as to a new, the end most effectually, & that I am

Sir Yr very Hble Serv't.

PS I wish merely for curiosity, and that I may be prepared with sufficient knowledge for any future favourable contingency to know the depth of Hell Gate, the largest ship of war that has ever passed it & the largest that can pass it?—G.W.

Part of the Washington "spy" letter and his inquiry about Hell Gate.

there was more delay. It went out to battle, but was battered by a storm and put in at Boston to refit. This caused an outburst of grumbling among American officers, which Washington did what he could to allay. But when he had refitted the French commander sailed for the West Indies.

"Nothing more was heard of the allies until the spring was well advanced," Senator Lodge says in his book, "when M. Gerard, the Minister, wrote, intimating that D'Estaing was about to return, and asking what we would do. Washington replied at length professing his willingness to cooperate in any way and offering, if the French would send ships, to abandon everything, run all risks and make an attack upon New York. Nothing further came of it and Washington heard that the fleet had gone to the Southern States."

It was undoubtedly this prospect of a combined land and sea attack on New York that led Washington to inquire as to the capacity of the Hell Gate channel. Although the help of the French navy at New York did not materialize it was Washington's steadfast belief that he and Clinton, the English General, would in time fight it out around New York.

It was about the time he wrote this letter in regard to the proper way to get information that Washington showed a pessimism about the outcome that was not characteristic of the man. To George Mason he wrote:

"I have seen without despondency even for a moment the hours which America

has styled her gloomy ones; but I have beheld no day since the commencement of hostilities that I have thought her liberties in such imminent danger as at present. Indeed we are verging so fast to destruction that I am filled with sensations to which I have been a stranger till within these three months."

The espionage letter reads:

MIDDLEBROOK, Mar. 21, 79.

SIR: With this letter you will receive Fifty Guineas for S—C—r, which you will cause to be delivered as soon as possible with an earnest exhortation to use them with all possible economy, as I find it very difficult to obtain hard money.

I wish C— could fall upon some more direct channel by which his letters could be conveyed, as the efficacy of his communications is lost in the circuitous route—if he could fall upon a method of conveying his letters to Genl Maxwell at Elizabethtown, or to Col Shreve at Newark, they would come to me with more dispatch, so of consequence render his correspondence more valuable.

As all great movements, and the fountain of all intelligence must originate at, & proceed from the headquarters of the enemy's army, C— had better reside at New York—meet with—and put on the airs of a Tory to cover his real character & avoid suspicion. In all his communications he should be careful in distinguishing matter of facts from matters of report. Reports and actions should be compared before conclusions are drawn, to prevent as much as possible deception.

Particular attention is to be paid to the arrival, & departure of all Fleets—and to the alterations in the cantonments of the Troops and their respective movements with the destination of them, if it to be come at, and before it

Postscript Reveals General Knew Strategic Value of Hell Gate Channel, Deepening of Which Has Long Been Delayed

is too late to profit by the knowledge.—All reinforcements, whether of whole corps—detachments—or recruits (for the purpose of filling their regiments) to be carefully marked, & the numbers—description—&c. properly designated.—All detachments and the strength & destination of them to be scrutinized with an eye equally attentive.

The temper and expectation of the Tories & refugees is worthy of consideration, as much may be gathered from their expectations and prospects—for this purpose an intimacy with some well informed Refugee may be political & advantageous.—highly so will it be to contract an acquaintance with a person in the naval department, who may either be engaged in the business of providing transports for the embarkation of Troops, or in victualling of them.—Many other things will occur upon reflection without an enumeration of them, I shall therefore only add my wishes that the whole may be placed on such a footing as to answer the end most effectually, & that I am, Sir, Yr very Hble Serv't,

G. WASHINGTON.

P. S.—I wish merely for curiosity, and that I may be prepared with sufficient knowledge for any future favourable contingency, to know the depth of Hell Gate—the largest ship of war that has ever passed it!—& the largest that can pass it!—G. W.

Most of the advice that Washington gives to the member of the Continental secret service is as good to-day for a man similarly situated as it was then. It is a good example of the sound common sense and intuition of Washington. Information such as he asks his agent to get about the English plans and movements is just what our enemies would like to know about our plans and movements to-day and probably just what they are seeking.

One Hurdle Less.

"SITTING next to me last night," said the subway traveller, "was a man who had his legs crossed; not in the ordinary manner, with the crossed leg and foot dangling, but with the ankle resting on the knee of his other leg, this making the foot project rigidly in people's way. The man sat there with his legs crossed in that fashion, quite unconcerned, reading a newspaper."

"People travelling in the subway get accustomed to looking out for themselves and everybody passing steered clear of this projecting foot, until the train stopped at a station. At this station, just as the guard was about to close the door, a man sitting further along in the car suddenly realized that this was where he wanted to get off and he jumped up and made a run for it."

"He never saw that projecting foot at all, he ran slam into it, hard enough almost to knock it off, but he never looked around; he kept right on and just made the door."

"Did it annoy the crosslegged man to think that he'd had his foot out in people's way like that? Quite the contrary."

"As the running man sped on the crosslegged man who had just been so jolted looked up from his paper and followed the other with his eye, while on his face there was a look of sour indignation which seemed to say:

"What do you mean by running into my foot that way?"

"And then he lifted his paper and went on reading again. But a minute later something very curious and interesting happened."

"A minute later this man lowered his newspaper, slowly, to let it rest upon his knees; and his face showed clearly that he was thinking. A moment later he uncrossed his legs and put both feet on the floor."

"Plainly his thought was that it was not the man who had run into him that was at fault, but he himself for putting his foot up in that manner, where it would be in people's way."

"He had seen a light, and it is a fact that from that time on he sat with his legs together and both feet on the floor and drawn back, as every man should do when riding in the subway."

Guardabassi, Soldier-Artist

(Continued from preceding page.)

as nothing else can. Do you remember that passage in 'Le Feu' or 'Under Fire' by Barbusse, where the soldier told of his going back to see his wife on a day's leave—how he reached there late in the evening and how it was raining and they had to take in some soldiers out of the wet? How the home consisted of one room and how in the morning the soldier's wife gave him a package of food saying, 'This I saved for you, it was to have been our supper, there was not enough to share around among all of us. Now you are to keep it—we have given them enough.'

He answered: "Duplicate that book and its incidents ten, twenty, thirty thousand times and you will have the anecdotes you want."

"But there must be a million new ones."

"There are, but somehow we do not like to tell it—it makes things seem more and less terrible than they are, and we who are fighting for Italy cannot afford to stop to think—to think of such things as I have witnessed. A shell falling into a graveyard returning the dead, the dead who always return dead. The sight is too awful, the sounds too horrible—and the stench, the heavy warm air full of the aroma of the mutilated, the tragic

bareness of everything! Not a tree, not a flower, not a blade of grass—nothing coming out of the ground, but everything going into it."

"And now?"

"I left Paris and my studio to go to Italy; now I have left Italy to come to America—my job is a difficult one. I must try to make America realize what Italy knows. I must try to show America that she has something financial, intellectual and commercial that she can give to Italy, that she must give to Italy if she would see the war won, if she would not have Prussia again take hold of us, and not only us but the whole world. For I say to you all that if Italy fails the Allies will fail, that America will fail."

At this moment the bell rang and a messenger boy brought in a letter. The Captain sprang for it.

"From my dear General," he said, holding it up to the light, and slowly tearing it across the end he added:

"America must rise above her stung—her judgment that is backed up by a phrase—the Italian has been called a 'Wop,' a 'Gago' and in those two words you have a more subtle knife than the dagger of war, a more terrible weapon than the mace, for it is on a slang word at times that a nation has gone down into oblivion."